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EDUCATION

Even at Top Colleges, Graduation Gaps Persist for Poor Students

As elite schools expand access for low-income students, graduation rates lag



Schools including Xavier University have expanded financial aid to cover things like lab fees and textbooks for students in need.

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By *Melissa Korn*

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Elite colleges nationwide have increased the number of low-income students they enroll in recent years, but getting those students to graduate has been more challenging.

The average difference in six-year graduation rates between students who received Pell grants—federal awards for low-income families—and those who didn't at a particular school was 8.9 percentage points, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of Education Department data. This is based on data from the 2011 entering class at all public and private, nonprofit schools where at least 50 students received Pell grants and 50 didn't.

Even at schools where at least two-thirds of students who started in 2011 graduated within six years, the gap was 6.4 percentage points. Pell recipients at those colleges stood a better chance of graduating than elsewhere, but still often significantly lagged behind their classmates. Students with Pell grants had graduation rates at least 10 percentage points lower

than other students at schools including Baylor University, Catholic University of America and the University of Pittsburgh.

As selective liberal arts schools and flagship public universities open their doors wider to students from modest backgrounds, the figures show many of those schools don't serve poor students as well as they do others.

"Access without success is a pretty hollow promise," said Jim Spain, vice provost of undergraduate studies at the University of Missouri. Based on the data, about 53% of students at Missouri who received Pell grants graduated from the school within six years, while 73% of those who didn't receive the grants completed their programs.

More than 100 elite colleges and universities are seeking to increase by 50,000 the number of low- and moderate-income students who enroll in and graduate from their colleges by 2025. As part of the Bloomberg Philanthropies-backed American Talent Initiative, schools including Emory University, Lehigh University and the University of Michigan plan to increase Pell enrollment to 20% of their undergraduate student bodies. Nationally, about 32% of undergraduates receive Pell grants.

But increasing socioeconomic diversity of student populations presents a risk for schools: Poor outcomes for growing Pell-recipient populations could start to drag down overall graduation rates.

Clemson University is aiming for a six-year graduation rate of 86%, for all students. Eighty-four percent of students without Pell grants now graduate in that time frame, compared with 71% for Pell recipients.

"Just getting to the institutional goal has to include closing the gap," said Clemson Provost Bob Jones.

Colleges and universities say the gaps aren't due to weaker academic abilities of low-income students, but rather to financial and cultural challenges.

Schools including Xavier University in Cincinnati and Denison University in Granville, Ohio, have expanded financial aid to cover things like lab fees and textbooks and set aside funds for sorority dues and emergency car repairs. Missouri now pays full tuition for Pell grant recipients who hail from inside the state. And Clemson will offer summer courses to some students this year in an effort to ease freshman-year pressures.

Robert Kelchen, an assistant professor of higher education at Seton Hall University who compiled the Education Department figures analyzed by the Journal, said schools generally aren't penalized for poor outcomes related to Pell grant recipients. The federal government spent \$28.2 billion on grants to seven million students in the 2017-18 academic year.



Nicole Flores, a junior at Clemson University, relies on Pell grants and scholarships to cover most of her college costs. PHOTO: NICOLE FLORES

“Most of the accountability is going to be through public shaming,” Dr. Kelchen said. “These are colleges that get a lot of public attention. These are colleges that we want students to attend. And in many cases they have resources to make change.”

Aaron Meis, vice president for enrollment management and student success at Xavier University, said the public release of Pell graduation rates in recent years—and their inclusion now as a factor in the U.S. News & World Report college rankings—gave him a “sense of urgency.”

At Xavier, 52% of students who started in 2011 and received Pell grants graduated from Xavier within six years, compared with 73% for non-Pell recipients.

“Families do have a right to know what they’re investing in. We have a responsibility to show them how well we’re doing or, frankly, how well we’re not doing,” said Mr. Meis.

Cultural fit can be a major challenge for low-income students at schools that historically have catered to wealthier families.

“I wanted to transfer my first semester,” said Nicole Flores, a 20-year-old junior at Clemson studying finance and accounting who relies on Pell grants and scholarships to cover most of her college costs.

Ms. Flores, a Latina first-generation college student, said she often bows out of social events like eating out and going to concerts. She works as a tutor to generate income and plans to graduate a semester early. Even so she is weeks late on paying \$140 in dues for her business fraternity.

“People don’t really understand how the other side lives sometimes,” she said.

Spelman College in Atlanta is reconsidering how to allocate financial aid and raising more scholarship money, after finding itself losing students three or four years in because they couldn’t pay their last few bills.

Roughly two-thirds of Pell recipients graduated from that school in six years, compared with 82% for those without Pell grants, according to the federal data.

Spelman President Mary Schmidt Campbell said the school isn’t rethinking how many low-income students it enrolls, but rather how it uses the minimal resources it has to support them.

“We’re really asking hard questions of ourselves,” she said.

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Write to
Melissa
Korn at
melissa.ko
rn@wsj.co
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